

## John Lewis, Lawyer, Is Dead at 64; Gave Up Wealth to Fight for the Poor

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John D. B. Lewis, the son of a Wall Street titan who became a lawyer to fight for the rights of the poor and powerless, and in December persuaded Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) of New York to pardon a paroled convict, died on Feb. 22 at home in Manhattan. He was 64.



John D.B. Lewis.  
Photo by Beverly Visitacion, 2003

The cause was lung cancer, said his wife, Laura Visitacion-Lewis, a New York State Supreme Court justice.

Mr. Lewis devoted his life to helping prisoners and other clients who could not pay him. His toughest fight lasted 12 years and took him from the New York State parole board to regulatory panels to state court to federal court, including the Supreme Court of the United States.

It ended on Dec. 21, 2007, when Governor Spitzer pardoned Mr. Lewis's client Frederick Lake, who had been paroled a decade earlier after serving six years in state prison for armed robbery. Except for Gov. [George E. Pataki](#)'s pardon of the comedian [Lenny Bruce](#) in 2003, it was the first pardon by a New York governor since 1979.

"Lawyers dream about cases like this," Mr. Lewis said at the time.

Mr. Lewis's father, Salim L. Lewis, began his career as a shoe salesman and rose to lead the Wall Street firm of Bear, Stearns. He pioneered the selling of huge blocks of stock and was a prominent philanthropist.

John David Bonner Lewis was born on May 4, 1943, in Manhattan. He attended the Collegiate School in Manhattan, the Pomfret School in Connecticut, and graduated from Harvard and Columbia Law School.

As an adult, he deliberately deserted his upper-class way of life. He began giving his money away, to down-and-out clients and to causes like Indian welfare, and never stopped.

In 1970, he went to work for a federally financed legal services agency in a basement storefront at Avenue D and Third Street on the Lower East Side. Three years later, he joined the [Legal Aid Society](#), which represents indigent clients in New York City. He first worked on criminal cases, and then on appeals for the society.

He interrupted his work for the society to work as a legal secretary for Judge Elliott Wilk, then on the civil court and later on the State Supreme Court. Justice Wilk, who died in 2002, was known for his decisions in favor of the homeless and against landlords.

In 1983, Mr. Lewis started a private practice, mainly taking clients who could not afford to pay him much, if anything. One client who did not fit this definition was Anthony Salvatore Casso, a mobster with the distinction of being the first mob defector booted out of the federal witness protection program.

Mr. Lewis represented many less-well-off prisoners, including Francisco Sanchez, an inmate at Elmira Correctional Facility, whose face was slashed by another prisoner. In 2002, the New York Court of Appeals, the state's highest court, used the case to expand the definition of what dangers correctional officials should be expected to foresee.

American Indians were a major concern for Mr. Lewis. In cases involving New York State Indians, he helped define the application of a 1790 federal law to land that tribes claimed New York State had inappropriately acquired from them.

He also worked at the [United Nations](#) and elsewhere to help redress the grievances of the Yanomami people of Brazil, whose lives were being disrupted by gold miners. He persuaded Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, a leader, to come with him to meet Javier Perez de Cuellar, the secretary general of the United Nations. Mr. Perez repeatedly approached the president of Brazil to help the native people.

Mr. Lewis organized behind the scenes to influence the United Nations [General Assembly](#) to pass a declaration last year giving native peoples the right of self-determination. He donated more than \$1 million to the Indian Law Resource Center.

In the Lake case, Mr. Lewis worked closely with Claudia Slovinsky and at least 13 other lawyers over the years. Despite an ever-accumulating pile of evidence indicating that Mr. Lake may have been wrongly convicted, Governor Spitzer's pardon did not address guilt or innocence.

Mr. Lewis first became involved in the case in 1996 after receiving a letter Mr. Lake sent from prison. The lawyer wrote a 127-page brief that secured Mr. Lake's parole on the first effort, an unusual occurrence.

Immigration authorities almost immediately began trying to deport Mr. Lake as a convicted criminal. Though there were countless legal twists and turns, many involving the arcana of immigration law, it was the original parole document that is believed to have informed the governor's decision to pardon. The document first argued against Mr. Lake's guilt, then described his rehabilitation.

Mr. Lewis is survived, in addition to his wife, by their daughter, Cari Lewis-Osborne; two brothers, Roger, of Oklahoma City, and Salim B., whose whereabouts are unknown; a sister, Bonnie Lewis of North Salem, N.Y.; and a granddaughter.

Justice Visitacion-Lewis said she had grown up poor in housing projects and was working as a secretary at the legal services agency when she met Mr. Lewis. He urged her to complete her undergraduate degree and to go to law school, then helped her do it.